

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACTING STYLE OF JAMES O'NEILL

by

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## Introduction

His obituary in the New York Clipper read in part: "Whether James O'Neill was a great actor or not will perhaps be best determined by posterity. To the multitudes that went to see him in...Monte Cristo, he was undoubtedly a great actor. To the more critical, perhaps, he appeared a distinctive player of certain roles. But, in the main, he was a great dramatic personality, a lovable player that gripped his audience and made them feel that he was always giving the best that was in him..."<sup>1</sup> A briefer, less affectionate statement in History of American Acting summed up James' entire career in one short comment which called him "an outstanding example of an actor who specialized in romantic roles".<sup>2</sup> And the thoroughness of James' dedication to his acting was observed by the New York Star which proclaimed the flamboyant James "an artist to his fingertips".<sup>3</sup> All these notices were aimed at an uneducated, Irish immigrant who was originally destined to be a machinist but whose greatest desire was to become an actor.

Throughout his career James O'Neill wanted to be a Shakespearean tragedian but his fate was to become a romantic hero. "It haunts me, I can't escape it,"<sup>4</sup> he declared of his role as Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo. But, was it simply fate which kept O'Neill from becoming the successor to his idol, Edwin Booth? Or was it simply that O'Neill did not possess the qualities which would have made him a successful Shakespearean actor?

James did develop a style which achieved for him a long and popular career as a romantic actor. What was this style? What influences affected James as a young actor?

In his early career, the young O'Neill was exposed to the public primarily through two acting troupes: McVickers' Company and the Hooley Company. In changing from one company to the other, James encountered a change in the types of roles he received and the method of training he obtained. Did this move also affect James' acting? Later in his career audiences returned night after night to see James execute his electrifying rendition of Monte Cristo. Why did millions come to adore the attractive Irishman? Why did the footlights cause James to strike a dynamic attitude and cry, "The world is Mine!"? Why did the houses remain only half-full when James attempted roles in other plays?

In examining these previous questions, this thesis will analyze the acting style which James O'Neill employed. The thesis will be divided into the following sections: The first two chapters present a brief general background and career resume of O'Neill, as well as a description of "the Irish-born peasant", as James referred to himself. The next two chapters trace the development of James' acting style with special emphasis on his early influences. The classical and romantic roles which James undertook and in which he employed this style are also examined. Chapter 4 takes a detailed look at James' portrayal of Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo, and its effect on the actor. Chapter 5 discusses James' inability to change his "romantic" style when "realism" and the new school of acting replaced his methods.

This study does not attempt to trace the career of James O'Neill or to prove or dispute his reputation as an actor, as these topics have been thoroughly covered by Lawrence Fisher in his Descriptive Study of the Acting Career of James O'Neill. Fisher has provided a valuable work, and many clues to James' style have been gleaned from the vast amount of career information in his dissertation. In contrast to Fisher, this thesis traces the dramatic methods which achieved fame for O'Neill as an actor and the refinement of his techniques. The inability of O'Neill to change this style as the times changed is also examined. In other words, the main concern of this thesis is a description of James O'Neill's acting style.

Footnotes for Introduction

<sup>1</sup>New York Clipper, August 18, 1920, p. 7, as quoted in Lawrence Fisher, A Descriptive Study of the Acting Career of James O'Neill, (University of Michigan, 1969), p. 244, hereafter cited as Fisher.

<sup>2</sup>Garff B. Wilson, A History of American Acting (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p. 219.

<sup>3</sup>New York Star, March 1, 1916, as quoted in Fisher, p. 244.

<sup>4</sup>Richard H. Little, "Haunted by the Ghost of Monte Cristo", Chicago Herald Record, Feb. 9, 1908, p. 37-38, as quoted in Fisher, p. 173.

### Biography of James O'Neill

James O'Neill smiled his confident smile and lied delicately through his teeth. "It was Kilkenny, smiling Kilkenny...where I was born one opal-tinted day in October, 1847."<sup>1</sup> It was his son, Eugene, who, at a later date, disclosed that many actors changed their birthdates for publication, that his father modestly cheated by only one year, and that James' actual birthdate was October 14, 1846. Other sources not only dispute the year (ranging from 1846<sup>2</sup> to 1849<sup>3</sup>) but also the month (from October to November).

Sources agree that James was born in Ireland of Irish parents and that the family settled in up-state New York before O'Neill's tenth year. Although the O'Neills set a rather spare table, James looked forward to a bright future, and in his youth he held a variety of jobs. His father and mother had hoped he might become a priest, but although he was a strong Catholic, he decided against a clerical profession and after a short period of schooling, he went to work at a clothing firm in Cincinnati.

One might wonder where O'Neill became interested in the theatre. O'Neill answered this in a poetic remembrance. After holding many jobs, "I was apprenticed to a machinist. Somehow, the clank of iron, the ring of the hammer, and the heavy glow of the forge seemed unattuned to the romance of Kilkenny's mossy towers...and so three or four years went along, careless young years, when spare evenings were spent pouring over a Shakespeare given me by an elder sister, of losing myself in the land of romance at the theatre where I was an established gallery god."<sup>4</sup>

O'Neill, himself, would one day become a "gallery god" before the audiences who would affect his life so greatly. Another source quotes O'Neill as stating more about the theatrical influences of his childhood: "I began with a background of poetry. My father was reciting poetry all the time. Instead of singing in the bathtub, he'd break out into Shakespeare."<sup>5</sup>

In 1876, O'Neill married Ella Quinlan, a quiet, well-bred, liberally educated girl equally devout in Catholicism. Ella's personality was a sharp contrast to the cavalier, earthy O'Neill, but James worshiped her until the end of his life. Three children were born to their family: James O'Neill, Jr., 1878, Edmund Burke, who died in infancy in 1885, and Eugene Gladstone in 1888. James' career demanded much of his time, and he left the raising of his two sons to Ella and various boarding schools. Before his marriage, James was known as a "dandy" and was popular with the ladies who saw him perform in Shakespearean roles.

O'Neill began his theatrical career as a classical actor, but when critics encouraged him to try other vehicles, he found that to save his career he had to heed their demands. While a young actor at McVickers' Theatre, O'Neill was heavily indoctrinated by old-time performers, and he found it difficult to work under their stringent demands. In 1883, James accepted the role of Edmund Dantes in the Charles Fechter version of Monte Cristo and discovered that he could be a star without meeting the demands of a classical actor. With Monte Cristo, however, James unknowingly accepted a specific fate. He began to play small towns and little known theatres,



although he played the character for over three decades to nearly four thousand audiences. There are two primary reasons why O'Neill remained Edmund Dantes for so many years: (1) The money was flowing into the deep cracks in the O'Neill bank account, and (2) the tradition that James established was almost hypnotic to the actor himself.

In his later years, O'Neill spoke of his infatuation with Monte Cristo in an almost desperate way. "I would like to bury Edmund Dantes so deep that he would never come to life again. Edmund Dantes is the old man of the sea around my neck. I have carried him twenty five years, but he won't let go. I can't break his hold...no, when I play Monte Cristo, they pack the house. When I play the Virginus well, they give me good audiences, but they don't take me as I want them to take me."<sup>6</sup> This helplessness to fate was characteristic of James O'Neill. Why did O'Neill succumb to public demand? Perhaps this was part of the very vulnerability which made him so popular with the matinee set. There are many references to James' naive nature and his ability to be swayed easily, and this may account for his desire to please the public.

Although O'Neill occasionally played a character part, the role of Dantes overwhelmed his career. In a study by Lawrence Fisher, O'Neill was credited with performing 162 new roles before Monte Cristo, which he began acting in 1883, and only 18 new roles after accepting Monte Cristo. Nearly nine times as many roles were portrayed by O'Neill before he fell into the part of the melodramatic hero. He officially retired in 1918, when he was seventy-two years

old, and illness immediately overtook him. After a long and drawn-out career, James suffered an equally and drawn-out battle with cancer which resulted in his death on August 20, 1920. His passing words to son Eugene were full of bitterness: "Eugene, I'm going to a better sort of life-here, all froth, no good rotteness!"<sup>7</sup>

The Gelbs report that the New York Clipper's obituary notice contained the following statement:

"There is something about the passing of James O'Neill that touches the heart, for he was the type of actor beloved by audiences. His excessive dramatic emotionalism always left an indelible impression on the minds and hearts of those who witnessed his performances...he loved the stage as none but one born to it can."<sup>8</sup>

Although he at one time enjoyed a star's billing, he preferred not to be a star. "I hope no one ever calls me a star again", he declared. "I wish to be known as an actor, and that is what very few of the advertised 'stars' of this country are today."<sup>9</sup> James died at 76. He was not a young man. He had not been cut off in the middle of a brilliant career. He had the abilities to become a good classical actor. James chose instead to become a money-making romantic hero whose elaborate acting style was filled with large gestures, booming soliloquies and eye-opening love scenes. He had loved acting Shakespeare but gave it up when public demand encouraged him toward more spectacular melodramatic pieces. Eugene O'Neill based his character James Tyrone in Long Day's Journey Into Night on his own father, James O'Neill. Although it is dramatically inspired, (and therefore, perhaps, not totally accurate) this speech by Tyrone

presents a convincing account of the tragedy of James O'Neill's career:

"I read all the plays ever written. I studied Shakespeare as you'd study the Bible. I educated myself. I got rid of an Irish brogue you could cut with a knife. I loved Shakespeare. I would have acted in any of his great poetry. And I acted well in him. I felt inspired by him. I could have been a great Shakespearean actor, if I'd kept on. I know that! In 1874, when Edwin Booth came to the theatre in Chicago where I was leading man... the first night I played Othello, he said to our manager, 'That young man is playing Othello better than I ever did!' That, from Booth, the greatest actor of his day or any other. And it was true...and I was only twenty seven years old! As I look back on it now, that night was the high spot of my career."<sup>10</sup>

O'Neill began as a poor Irish machinist and educated himself to become a well-known actor by the time he was thirty years old. The following chapter will discuss the physical appearance of O'Neill, as well as the abilities O'Neill possessed to help him acquire the title he longed for: James O'Neill, Actor.

Footnotes for Chapter I

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb, O'Neill, (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1960) p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Doris Alexander, The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill, (New York: The Dunlap Society, 1902) p. 29, hereafter referred to as Alexander.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis C. Strang, "The Melodramatic James O'Neill", Famous Actors of the Day in America, vol. II (Boston: L. C. Page and Company, 1902), p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Gelbs, p. 21

<sup>5</sup> Alexander, p. 63

<sup>6</sup> Richard Little, "Haunted by the Ghost of Monte Cristo", Chicago Herald Record, Feb. 9, 1908, p. 37-38, as quoted in Fisher, p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> Princeton University Library, Theatre Collection: O'Neill-Tyler Letter, as quoted in Fisher, p. 248.

<sup>8</sup> Gelb, p. 431.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey into Night, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) p. 150.

### The Appearance and Abilities of O'Neill

In Chapter I, it was noted that O'Neill drew over four thousand audiences to his performances of Monte Cristo alone. O'Neill's success was attributed to his ability to capture audiences with his personal magnetism and awe them with his passionate emotionalism. What physical stage picture did James O'Neill present? What special skills did he possess to make him so attractive to audiences?

This chapter will answer these questions in the three sections which deal with O'Neill's appearance, voice and his natural and acquired skills. The three following chapters will discuss the way which James used these capabilities in the various roles he played.

### The Physical Appearance of O'Neill

O'Neill did not possess a large, muscular physique, but the audiences were seldom aware of this because James had such erect bearing, moved quite swiftly and gracefully and generally appeared to "lord over" those who were, in reality, quite larger and stronger than he. James was slender but a bit "barrel chested" as seen in his portraits. He had a square face, square shoulders, and a straight countenance.

The Gelbs reveal quite a flattering picture of O'Neill in their description of him:

"James O'Neill, at thirty, was an irresistably romantic figure...He sometimes wore high-heeled boots on stage to increase his five-feet, eight inches -- he had a compact well-balanced figure,

graceful carriage and nobility of bearing that more than compensated for his lack of physical stature. His hair was black and curled over a high forehead. His eyes were melting and dark...and could burn with passion. His nose and chin followed classically chiseled lines: His even, white teeth gleamed against a dark complexion."<sup>1</sup>

This description is confirmed by several pictures of O'Neill. In observing the picture of O'Neill as he appeared as d'Artagnan in The Musketeers, (see illustration No. 1) one sees a slender man who wears his costume in a nonchalant, devilish way. His long flowing locks are framed by a full-plumed felt hat, and a black moustache curls above his lips. His waist is adorned by a heavy rapier in its metallic hilt. O'Neill is in a ready "pose" with one gauntleted hand drawing the sword, while his feet, in their cuffed boots, appear as ready for a gay mazurka as for a swordfight. The whole stance is theatrical. The face, with its defiant scowl, is quite handsome. The nose is well-proportioned and straight. But the main feature of the squarish-chiseled face is the black, piercing eyes of O'Neill. He used his flashing eyes well in the picture. They are the eyes of one who has suffered every torment the world can afford, one who has loved the most petal-like of maidens, and one who has slapped his knee in drunken laughter at the most ribald of salty-sailors stories. One might wonder what the young, virtuous theatre-going mademoiselles of the late nineteenth century thought with James presenting this picture?

In his youth, O'Neill was noted for his dashing appearance. He wore attractive clothing which was set off by his appealing physique.

The Dramatic Mirror described James as "a very dapper, lively young man fashionably attired".<sup>2</sup> As the actor aged, his handsome face became serene and mellowed. To the delight of O'Neill, his appearance was often likened to that of a priest. When he was playing The Abbe Bonaparte in 1908, one critic noted that "In physical bearing in feature and expression, Mr. O'Neill is an ideal priest".<sup>3</sup>

The general information from various sources agrees that James was handsome and of slight, squarish build, but that he moved and held his posture erect in a large, flamboyant way, and that he looked attractive in his costumes. Another general consensus is that James had a strong, agreeable voice.

#### The Voice of O'Neill

James was quite proud of his voice. He taught himself to project quite loudly (as the theatres of the time were large and no amplification was used) although he raised the pitch of his voice only a note or two in doing so. It was "in this way he was able to convey fiery emotion without shouting, which set him apart from the stock actors who resorted to ranting".<sup>4</sup>

Many of the actors at this time did shout, and there were still managers who, upon being asked if an actor was good, would reply, "I'll say he is, you can hear him clear out on the sidewalk". O'Neill not only projected well, but he enunciated each word with a studied grace.

Hughes described James' vocal quality as "rich voice with a touch of brogue".<sup>5</sup> "Oh, that brogue!"<sup>6</sup> James lamented. He called

it the Kilkenny twist and worked hard to rid himself of it. The thick accent was a constant source of amusement to the critics; and one reviewer, after seeing James in the role of a Scottish monarch in Elizabeth Queen of England advised him: "But young Mr. O'Neill must be reminded that King James was not an Irishman."<sup>7</sup> Harrison Fiske called James' voice, "rich, mellow, and musical".<sup>8</sup> His voice was baritone, but this was also due to his studied efforts. "It was a tenor in the beginning,"<sup>43</sup> James would say. Then he would proudly say that he never had vocal lessons but that he taught himself.

As this evidence indicates, James had a rich, full voice, which was the result of self-discipline and training. He had, a thick Irish accent, or "brogue" that bothered the critics, and which James took great pains to alleviate. Along with his attractive physical appearance and versatile voice, James also had certain natural and acquired skills which he later used in his career.

#### Acquired Skills of O'Neill

The romantic actor of the melodramatic era needed to possess strength and endurance because he most likely spent much of the duration of the play in sword dueling, leaping and darting about, and in many "narrow escapes", which included escaping the collapsing props and scenery. One had to be quick, agile, and generally in good physical shape. "On the stage, he [O'Neill] added to his natural endowments, (aside from the high heels) a swashbuckling manner, heroic gestures and a carefully acquired skill with a rapier. These



characteristics were perfectly suited to the extravagant melodramas of the era and to the virtuoso recitals of Shakespearean roles for which the public had an endless appetite."<sup>9</sup> "His gymnastic abilities became legend in his later career, especially with reference to his sword fighting,"<sup>11</sup> stated one article. In general, sources agree that O'Neill had dynamic, athletic abilities which proved valuable in his acting.

James also developed a charming, romantic manner. This made him quite popular with the ladies. Adalaide Neilson, the famous British actress, said of O'Neill's Romeo, "When I played with other Romeos, I thought they would climb up the trellis to the balcony, but when I played with Jimmy O'Neill, I wanted to climb down the trellis, into his arms".<sup>12</sup> Such romantic finesse later resulted in popularity with the matinee set. Several sources state the amusing account of how, when O'Neill was executing a particularly vigorous love scene on stage, the gentlemen of the audience would time the O'Neill kiss on stage with their pocket watches while their feminine companions peeked at James through their frilly handkerchiefs. James captured the audience well. The New York Dramatic Mirror mentioned nearly all of these attributes in the review of O'Neill's de'Artagnan in the Musketeers: "Mark the effectiveness of O'Neill's sword - play, the fire of his love making, his buoyant and agile grace of movement, his mobile facial expression, the ease with which he doffs his plumed hat, and the swagger which he wears his ever ready rapier. This is d'Artagnan himself, and I advise every young actor who gets the chance to study the impression in every detail."<sup>13</sup>

James was young, handsome, athletic, and enthusiastic when he attempted to become one of the world's great Shakespearean players; but these qualities were the very things which made him become something quite different.

Footnotes for Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Gelb, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>L. H. Mito, "James O'Neill's New Play", Kansas City Post, Locke Collection, a theatrical collection in the New York Public Library, No other information available, as quoted in Fisher, p. 238-239.

<sup>4</sup>Gelb, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Glen Hughes, A History of the American Theatre 1700-1950. (Hollywood, Samuel French, Inc., 1951) p. 268.

<sup>6</sup>Alexander, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Shaeffer, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup>Harrison Grey Fiske, "James O'Neill" Famous American Actors of Today, Ed. by Charles Wingate (New York: Thos. Y. Crowell and Co., 1896) p. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher, p. 156, hereafter referred to as Fiske, as quoted in Fisher.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup>Gelb, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup>Locke Collection: "Gallery of the Gods: James O'Neill," no other information available, as quoted in Fisher, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup>Gelb, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup>Alexander, p. 69-70.

### O'Neill's Brief Career as a Classical Actor

"There is but one kind of acting for me -- that of the classic drama."<sup>1</sup> Three years before his death, O'Neill spoke these words to a journalist from the Philadelphia Record. It is ironic that he should say such a thing after having spent most of his acting career in melodramatic roles. Perhaps James longed to begin his career again or to return to a time when there was a promising future before him.

O'Neill's earliest known role was the Sentinel in Mazeppa. This seven-night run play occurred in 1865, when O'Neill was about twenty years old.<sup>2</sup> He followed Mazeppa with Toodles, in which he played George Acorn, at the National Theatre in Cincinnati.<sup>3</sup> James was quite naive in his early career, and because he was so in love with the theatre, he easily became drawn into the action of the plays. As a young actor, he was playing a nameless character in The Coleen Bawn when this involvement caused him a great deal of embarrassment. The leading lady and the gentleman playing opposite her were engaged in a spirited dialogue on the stage and when she finally confessed she was in love with him, he refused her. James had never cared for the leading man, and he was so moved by the scene that he blurted out, "I'll take you, he no good anyway". This, coming from a walk-on bit player, caused a great deal of amusement to the audience, and the leading gentleman asked O'Neill to remove himself from the stage. Alexander quotes O'Neill as saying, "I made my exit somehow or other and was greeted with jeers of derision by the actors and a lot of my friends and acquaintances, who had consented to act as supers to help out the stage manager. It was then that I

announced my determination to go on the stage. I said to them, 'You're all laughing at me now because you think I made an ass of myself. I'm going to be an actor; I'm going to be a star; and you'll be coming to me someday asking for a position under me, and then your laugh will be on the other side of your face'."<sup>4</sup> It was with this remark that O'Neill "became an actor", but not without many criticisms.

In James' early career, the most frequent complaint of the critics was that it was difficult to understand him through his thick brogue, or the "Kilkenny twist" as he referred to it. "As late as 1891, a critic from the New York Times attacked him for pronouncing past as "parsed" and austere as "oystare".<sup>5</sup> James became extremely bothered by such criticism and set to work to alleviate the offending accent. James was quite proud of his voice and diction and spoke of ridding his voice of the offensive brogue: "I was my own instructor, I worked it out in my room; never had a lesson in vocal culture in my life".<sup>6</sup> O'Neill worked diligently to overcome many of the faults which the critics said he possessed, but it was not until 1872 that he became an established Shakespearean actor at McVicker's Theatre in Chicago, and began to enjoy some measure of popularity.

What actors and actresses had an influence on James as a young performer? Who molded his early acting style? Three artists who worked with James during his early acting experience appear to have had a great deal of effect on the style that he developed. They were (1) Edwin Forrest. (2) Edwin Booth, and (3) Charlotte Cushman.

Edwin Forrest was a dynamic actor on stage. When James appeared with him in 1872, the critic of the Tribune said of Forrest's King Lear: "His magnificent physique, rugged exterior, tempestuous style of acting, all lent verisimilitude to the kingly role".<sup>7</sup> Forrest once shocked a friend who had just complimented him on playing Lear with "Play Lear! What do you mean, Sir? I do not play Lear...I play Hamlet, Richard, Shylock, Virginius but by God, sir, I am Lear!"<sup>8</sup>

Although Forrest was quite a portly man, he trained himself to have a dancer's grace on the stage. His voice was noted as "phenomenal," and he delivered his speeches with a studied technique.

It is easy to see why the young O'Neill would be awed by such a performer. O'Neill said of Forrest, "Mark me, he was intolerant of presumptuous stupidity but where he saw you were eager to learn, and showed a capability to understand his teaching, no more gentle being ever lived, and no grander soul ever hid itself beneath a certain ruggedness of manner."<sup>9</sup>

James developed many of the same characteristics as Forrest. He, too, was later remembered for his graceful movement, strong voice and elaborate delivery. At this point in his career, James was developing into a "physical" actor because of his vigor and athletic competence. Critics, to O'Neill's disappointment, found this a detriment when he played the psychological Shakespearean roles. "His mannerisms are not irremediable and his tendency to overact can be pruned, if he will take the pains to study. An excess of vigor and movement in any young actor is a hopeful sign."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in 1874, the Tribune cited O'Neill as being "over-glad, over-reckless, over-

dashing, and not quite easy",<sup>11</sup> in his portrayal of Dazzle in London Assurance, not a Shakespearean tragedy, but played during the same time period (1874) as the classical roles. James desired to be a dynamic tragedian, and yet the critics felt that he was overplaying the roles.

Forrest had been a good model for the physical roles, but James worked with another model later who influenced O'Neill with a more delicate, psychological method of acting. This artist was Edwin Booth. He unconsciously set a pattern for James in two ways" (1) Booth's style of acting was much more subtle and psychologically oriented than the broad, method of Forrest which O'Neill was accustomed to, and (2) O'Neill thought of Booth as the "ideal actor" and would idolize him for the rest of his life.

During the first three months of 1875, O'Neill played several Shakespearean tragedies with Booth. Among these were Hamlet, Othello, and Merchant of Venice. This was a beneficial period for O'Neill as he worshiped the older actor. "There was none like Booth, ah, now, you talk of the best-natured and sweetest tempered, as well as the greatest of them all,"<sup>12</sup> O'Neill later recalled when asked who his favorite actor was. Booth was praised by the critics also for his ability to be more delicate and refined than Forrest. Towse, in A History of the American Theatre described Booth's Hamlet: "Booth was at his best in Shakespeare, and best of all, as Hamlet. In the later role, he was graceful, refined, melancholy, philosophical, dryly humorous, and satirical."<sup>13</sup>

Gelb quotes O'Neill's personal comment on Booth: "Booth as a young man was the handsomest actor I had ever seen on the stage. He was the picture of manly beauty. Not only all women, but men, as well, were enthusiastic over Booth's personal charm."<sup>14</sup> The privilege of working with Booth encouraged some admirable performances from James.

O'Neill appeared as Brutus in Julius Ceasar with Booth portraying Marc Antony. Critics then had a chance to compare the two actors, but after praising Booth, they were equally kind to James: "As Brutus, Mr. O'Neill was earnest, manly, and dignified, showing an intelligent perception of the requirements of the role, and manifesting a praiseworthy determination to give it the best of his ability. He can improve the impersonation greatly by speaking his soliloquies with more deliberation and slowness."<sup>15</sup>

Also praising another engagement of the O'Neill-Booth duo in Othello was this review which said of James' Othello: "Mr. O'Neill has a distinct conception of the part and presents it effectively. What is lacking in his personation are the simplicity and dignity which the character possesses."<sup>16</sup> The review goes on to state that O'Neill captured some of the more subtle points in the role that other actors had missed. A critic in one Chicago newspaper felt quite sure that James patterned his style after Booth: "Most of all did he become the pattern of Edwin Booth. So keenly did he study Booth that he copied even his defects in mannerisms. He dressed like him, posed like him, and finally came to speak like him."<sup>17</sup>



O'Neill strongly disagreed with the above statement. Alexander quotes O'Neill as saying, "I couldn't copy any man".<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Chicago Times Herald reported that James claimed his characterization of Shakespearean roles was original. This 1897 notice stated: "Mr. O'Neill does not claim his Hamlet is the greatest the world ever saw, but he does assert that it is the result of a lifetime of deep thinking and original ideas. He also asserts that his Hamlet bears no resemblance to that of any other Hamlet, dead or living."<sup>19</sup> Thus, James' admiration of Booth had its limits, although O'Neill idolized Booth until his death. Booth, unfortunately, did not share the same sentiments about O'Neill. Some years later, when O'Neill appeared in Passion Play as Christ, Booth forbade the production from playing in his Booth's Theatre. He said he was surprised that those actors would consent to appear in it, with the exception of "Jim O'Neill".

The third artist to influence James was Charlotte Cushman. She played Chicago (at McVicker's) with O'Neill two times. Their first engagement was in 1872, and they played together again in 1873. James spoke of Miss Cushman with the highest regard: "I learned from her the art of so emphasizing one word that the meaning of the sentence was clear."<sup>20</sup> Charlotte Cushman used her voice to great advantage and was well known for her excellent vocal quality and delivery. James wrote, "She got more out of language than anyone I ever listened to."<sup>21</sup>

Cushman was also known for her no-nonsense gruffness. Louis Sheaffer says in O'Neill, Son and Playwright: "It was said of her Lady Macbeth that she 'was wont to bully her royal husband in a way that tempted one to call the police', while the actress herself used to complain that the actors who played her consort were 'such

little men I have to look down at them'." James did not let Cushman bully him and put in a commendable performance while playing opposite her in Macbeth. One Chicago reviewer hailed James for "meeting the demands of Macbeth with a readiness absolutely astonishing".<sup>22</sup>

When he played opposite her, Cushman "coached" James in the business "McCready used to do" and tapped him on the shoulder in a gentle way to show him when she was pleased. When James appeared as Macduff in Macbeth the next year with Cushman, the press reviewed him as "an excellent Macduff...giving the text with commendable care, and showing genuine fire in the more forcible situations".<sup>23</sup> James evidently benefitted from Cushman's coaching.

James, though he had little formal education, was quite intelligent and demonstrated this in his ability to invent "stage business" which would make his characters more novel. For example, O'Neill and Booth were working together in Othello (Booth playing Iago and James playing Othello), and James had in his possession an ancient sword much bejewelled and rather flashy which he wished to wear during the performance. Booth insisted that James leave the sword off because it would be cumbersome, and James wouldn't use it in the scene. James decided Booth's advice was sound but while he was toying with the sword, he realized that it would only come half-way from the hilt, then snapped back loudly. So he wore the sword and upon the lines,

"If thou dost slander her and torture me  
Never pray more; abandon all remorse."

James sidled up to Booth, sword half-drawn. With the line...

"Nay, Nay! Thou shouldst be honest."

O'Neill sprung the sword, and the weapon snapped back loudly into the hilt. The audience applauded with vigor, and Booth later congratulated James warmly.

O'Neill played over fifty characters in his classical career, which lasted from the mid 1860's to the mid 1870's. The times were changing, and Shakespearean tragedies were being replaced in the audience's favor by the melodramas of Boucicault, Taylor, and Campbell. Audiences wanted less psychological suffering and more spectacular entertainment.

"James O'Neill knew perfectly well that if he devoted himself to Hamlet he would quickly go bankrupt,"<sup>24</sup> said Alexander in The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill was also establishing a reputation for "overdoing it" in gesture and emotionalism. The Chicago Daily Tribune stated, in 1874, that O'Neill's Romeo was getting to be "forced": "There is no spontaneity about his rendition of the part. His sentiment is not natural, his passion forced, and his action constrained or overwrought...[of the balcony scene] It is so insincere that his fervor borders all the time on the burlesque."<sup>25</sup> Another critic stated, "Superfluity is Mr. O'Neill's besetting sin...he is over-anxious not to lose a point... if he quivers with emotion at the words 'Good Morning' how is he adequately to say 'I love you'. He is driven to superhuman efforts to make a fair contrast and this makes him gasp and otherwise tear himself to tatters. When he has overcome these faults, he will be a charming actor on the high road to fame."<sup>26</sup>

James argued that he was only anxious to please the audiences and that he was taking great pains to deliver his lines with the utmost in emotional sincerity.

The audiences were demanding more and more melodramas, and shortly, O'Neill received an offer which helped him become the "gallery god" he had dreamed of as a boy. A different form of acting was becoming the vogue, a style which would boost James into the "star" billing of romantic hero.

Footnotes for Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>Gelbs, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup>Fisher, p. 266.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. p. 267.

<sup>4</sup>Alexander, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p. 36.

<sup>7</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, Dec.29, 1872, as quoted in Fisher, p. 77.

<sup>8</sup>Arthur Hornblow, A History of the Theatre in America, Vol. II,  
(Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1919) p. 36.

<sup>9</sup>Alexander, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, April 12, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher, p.78.

<sup>11</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, No. 8, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher, p. 115.

<sup>12</sup>Alexander, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup>Hughes, p. 243.

<sup>14</sup>Gelb, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, March 19, 1873, p. 8, as quoted in Fisher, p.83.

<sup>16</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, March 7, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher, p.85-86.

<sup>17</sup>Alexander, p. 38.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Chicago Times Herald, Feb. 27, 1897, p. 11, as quoted in Fisher, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup>Alexander, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup>Montrose J. Moses, "Stage History of Famous Players", The Theatre,  
April, 1905, p. 93, as quoted in Fisher, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup>Sheaffer, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, Dec. 29, 1872, p. 4 as quoted in Fisher, p. 77.

<sup>24</sup>Alexander, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, Oct. 12, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher,  
p. 90.

<sup>26</sup>Sheaffer, p. 30-31.

### O'Neill Becomes a Matinee Idol

In May of 1874, O'Neill left McVicker's after two years and joined Richard Hooley's "Parlor-Home of Comedy". Hooley offered James both more money than McVickers had been paying him and the promise of star billing. James hesitated because Hooley's rarely produced Shakespeare, relying much more heavily on melodramatic pieces. But after a trifling argument with McVickers, James began working at Hooley's. There were several ways in which this move affected James' career:

1. O'Neill was now the leading man and no longer worked with such artists as Booth and Cushman. Therefore, he did not have to meet the rigorous demands and high standards required by such actors.
2. Because O'Neill had developed an eloquent, physical, and basically technical style, the roles of the flashy melodramatic heroes were much more suited to his abilities than the Shakespearean roles.
3. Since O'Neill played melodramas well, the public saw no reason for him to play other roles.

James' first season with Hooley's brought him audience popularity and critics' approval; and he ended this initial season on May 1, 1875, with his first appearance as Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo, although not in the Fechter version he later came to own.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit of the Times praised James' Edmund Dantes as "a spirited piece of acting"<sup>2</sup> in this early production.

From May 10, 1875, to May 27, 1876, James toured the San Francisco area with Hooley's stock company appearing in such melodramatic vehicles as Lillian's Last Love, the Octoroon, and The Ticket-of-Leave-Man. James usually played the hero and quickly became popular with audiences and the critics. "Mr. O'Neill's Bob Brierly is certainly an admirable impersonation...every scene being applauded,"<sup>3</sup> stated Figaro, commenting on O'Neill's role in Ticket-of-Leave Man. The same periodical, reviewed Lillian's Last Love and pronounced James' portrayal effective. "Mr. O'Neill as Oliver Routledge, an artist, gave to the character a peculiar grace and quiet effectiveness."<sup>4</sup>

After the San Francisco tour, James returned to Chicago and spent his next seven years in New York, Chicago, and Boston, acting with the Hooley troupe. During this time, he primarily played dashing heroes such as Count Vladimir in The Danicheffs, David Garrick in David Garrick, and Maurice Levine in Magnolia. Although he was accustomed to this type of role, he sometimes undertook various "character roles" for variety. Among these were the Indian Wahnotee in The Octoroon, Pierre in The Two Orphans, and Abrams in Belasco's Proof Positive. These "character roles" were not always well received, but James continued to sprinkle his repertoire with them.

When James portrayed Pierre in The Two Orphans, he was not supposed to be a "swashbuckling" hero. Pierre was a cowardly crippled man who became the hero through his kindness and intelligence. (See Illustration No. 2) The portrait of James in this character reveals a hunched over-figure who is holding his hands meekly clenched before him. His head is ducked apologetically, and he looks a thoroughly



miserable character. O'Neill was criticized for making Pierre "too robust" physically: "Pierre was a cripple, after all, and his confession of cowardice often repeated ought to be accepted as a key to the character before the last act. O'Neill makes him a hero to begin with and allows him to spout his petty sentiments in the first act."<sup>5</sup>

More encouraging were the critics' notices about Abrams, a semi-comic Jew, which O'Neill portrayed in David Belasco's Proof Positive: "Mr. O'Neill plays 'Abrams' - an entirely new departure for him... and I consider it a remarkable good piece of acting. He sinks his identity completely, has a new voice, a new gait, a new appearance, and all of them well adapted to the character which he assumes."<sup>6</sup> James had intended to mask his own personality in the character and had said, "For a creditable performance, the actor must lose his own identity and for the time being assume the personality of the character in which he is cast".<sup>7</sup> He put this philosophy to use again in another "character part", and the audience reacted in an unexpected way.

James was in his early thirties when he portrayed Christ in Jewish playwright Salmi Morse's Passion Play. The play, which was under the direction of David Belasco, was originally quite religious and devout, but Belasco had decided to make it an epic to remember. James undertook the part only after finding that it was approved by Bishop Allemani of the Catholic Church of California. James' preparation for the role was extensive. He "sank his own identity" by giving up smoking, drinking, and other worldly pleasures. O'Neill even moved into his dressing room, leaving his unhappy wife at home

alone. He requested solemn rehearsals and spent his non-rehearsal time in his dressing room in contemplation. For James, the role was an extension of his religious worship:

"To me it was not acting. It was devotion, and I tried to speak the lines with all due reverence for their sacred origin."<sup>8</sup> The devout O'Neill was said to have looked much like the pictures of Christ, and the audiences were aghast at O'Neill's realistic performance. During the run of the show, it was reported that several people fainted, women fell on their knees praying loudly, and many patrons burst from the theatre and assaulted passing Jews on the streets.

Belasco was much impressed with James' conviction in the role. William Winter quoted the director in Life and Art of David Belasco as saying, "The effect of the poor people on their knees, praying and sobbing and the actor [O'Neill] with his delicacy, refinement and grandeur, typified the real Prophet, and I believe to himself he was the Prophet."<sup>9</sup>

James was so convincing in the role that he was dragged off, still in costume, and fined fifty dollars for impersonating Christ; and the play closed after a short eight-night run. This portrayal indicated that James had the ability to be effective in "character roles". The style which he used in these roles, however, was better focused when playing energetic characters which included the famed Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo, the role which soon took over O'Neill's entire career.

Monte Cristo was a swashbuckling tale of revenge which required the actor portraying Dantes to actually portray several characters.

At the play's beginning, Dantes, a young sailor has everything. He has become the captain of his ship and is marrying the beautiful Mercedes. Danglars, another sailor, is jealous of Dantes' captainship; and Mercedes' cousin, Fernand, wants Mercedes for himself. Fernand and Danglars' plot to do Dantes in by preparing a false letter which sets Dantes up as a traitor. The police chief, Villefort, has Dantes falsely arrested to protect his own brother, who is the real traitor. Eighteen years elapse between Acts I and II, and Edmund has greatly aged while imprisoned in the Chateau d'If. He escapes and disguises himself as Abbe Busoni to avoid Villefort's police. Dantes discovers how he was betrayed and vows to punish Danglars, Fernand, and Villefort. He flees to Monte Cristo where he later becomes the elegant Count. He eventually takes revenge on the three villains. When Villefort is arrested, Dantes cries "ONE."; when Fernand commits suicide he shouts "TWO!"; and at the close of the play Danglars is killed in a swordfight, and Dantes cries "THREE!" As the play ends, Dantes is a middle-aged man. His age changed, but also his social status and health varied. This involved quick changes of character and was quite demanding. Fiske observed James' ability to make these changes work. "In his [O'Neill's] role as Dantes, he demonstrates his mastery of the technique of the stage art, and exhibits the versatility of his talents. Whether as the rollicking, nimble sailor of the prologue, or the emaciated convict making his bold stroke for liberty, or the gentle-voiced, sad-eyed priest, or the opulent Count of Monte Cristo, he is equally effective."<sup>10</sup>

O'Neill was not the first actor to play Edmund Dantes. Previously, a French actor named Charles Fechter had made the character popular. Monte Cristo was based on a novel by Alexander Dumas, but Fechter had adapted his own version. For four years Fechter had portrayed the character successfully, but with Fechter's death in 1879, the Monte Cristo script fell into the hands of John Stetson. Fechter was, quite frankly a tough act to follow. The New York Times praised Fechter's performance as "containing flashes of histrionic inspiration, sudden flamings up, so to speak, of passionate identification which come as near to genius as anything now to be seen on our stage."<sup>11</sup>

James began to portray Edmund Dantes at Booth's Theatre in New York for \$600 a week in 1883. Upon accepting the role, he did not have time to prepare it since he was snowed in in Boston finishing The Celebrated Case during the week of Monte Cristo's first performance. The opening night, February 17, 1883, was a disaster after only three days of rehearsal. The Dramatic Mirror observed: "James O'Neill did not begin the work of rehearsing until Tuesday of last week... His memory is not acute; it takes him a long while to commit even an ordinary part to memory...Monte Cristo is very long...consequently, he was imperfect, or "fluffy", as our English friends put it, fishing for his words, hesitating and stumbling...this uncertainty, added to the natural nervousness inspired by such an occasion, made Mr. O'Neill's performance quite ineffective, and gave us no chance for judging how well he might do the part under more favorable auspices."<sup>12</sup>

Another critic from The Spirit of the Times was harsher:  
"The revival of Monte Cristo was a failure and...it deserved to fail...Mr. O'Neill is an actor with an Irish name and an Irish accent but without any Irish sympathy, passion, or magnetism."<sup>13</sup>  
James felt the notices were fair. He said, "The critics were right that time. I was bad. I knew it. But, I got at the play with hammer and tongs. I rehearsed all day in my rooms. By the end of the week, the play was going well."<sup>14</sup>

And the play did go well. The role of Dantes was well-suited to James' abilities. One of these abilities was O'Neill's versatile voice; and Monte Cristo allowed him to use it to its fullest potential. Fiske noted that James' voice was "rich, mellow, and musical and is susceptible to a wide range of expression".<sup>15</sup>  
An article comparing Fechter to O'Neill stated that one of the reasons Fechter was so popular was that he had a melodious voice and expressive vocal quality; but the critic unhesitatingly added, "O'Neill possesses, too, almost as beautiful and readily varying voice"<sup>16</sup>  
as the much praised Fechter.

And the actor needed to have a varying vocal quality to give the full flavor of the Monte Cristo script, which was a demanding one. The lines employed were quite artificial, and often a line had to be delivered slowly and emphatically because the whole message or "scheme" might be concentrated into one, short speech. Also, the actor had to be convincing, or the lines became laughable sentimentality. Below are selected samples of the lines of Edmund Dantes from Monte Cristo:

Edmund: She forget me? - Mercedes unfaithful? Oh, my father, doubt of heaven - doubt of Providence - doubt of your own being - but never doubt Mercedes.

Edmund: [at his wedding] O Monsieur Moral - O Mercedes - Oh, my father - see, the tears are in my eyes. Oh, my dear wife, dear friends, speak my thanks to my benefactor. I cannot say them, I cannot speak!

Edmund: Saved! Mine, the treasures of Monte Cristo! The world is mine.<sup>17</sup>

An actor who could effectively deliver these lines could cause a great deal of enthusiastic applause from the audience. O'Neill employed a "colorful" delivery. The tinge of brogue sometimes entered his words. He projected loudly and yet poetically. "It is a pleasure to hear him read lines", observed an article on O'Neill. "The art of elocution as practised by players of a few decades ago is apparently lost, and few of the modern players can even approximate the smoothness and effectiveness of one of the old school. He has all the poetry of delivery, the rich vocalization, the shaking and coloring that is needed or would be expected."<sup>18</sup>

This eloquent delivery brought harsh criticism from other critics, however. "Unquestionably, Mr. O'Neill still plays the sailor, priest, and millionaire with the broad artificiality of the old-time elocutionists, so dear to church entertainments,"<sup>19</sup> carped the St. Paul Dispatch. This "old school" method involved loud, clearly enunciated line delivery so that not one single phrase was lost. James used this method throughout his career, and though it

was effective, it eventually dated him. Just as effective as his melodious voice, was James' physical appearance.

O'Neill was a handsome actor. His face was described as "beautiful in its cameo-like profile and beautiful in its mobile expressiveness. His eyes are large, dark, lustrous, dreamy in response, flashing in action. His mouth is sensitive, yet firm, the shade of sadness with its smile giving strange interest to the whole countenance."<sup>20</sup> This appearance harmonized well with James' upright bearing. Strang observed, "Mr. O'Neill's Dantes was always picturesque".<sup>21</sup> Journalist L. H. Mitchell echoes these sentiments with the comment that James had "the dignity of bearing to invest the somewhat supernatural Count of Monte Cristo with likeable and mysterious qualities that grip the interest".<sup>22</sup> Fiske supported his observation with "his movements are grace itself; his attitudes are superbly picturesque".<sup>23</sup>

The "attitudes" which Mr. Fiske spoke of, were a device of the "old school" which James used not only to create a stage picture, but to cue the audience to applaud. If the audience responded to the cue and gave hearty applause, the actor had succeeded. This was known as "playing for points". Many years before Monte Cristo, when James was working with veteran actor Joseph Jefferson, he learned about the art of making "points". After a scene where O'Neill and Jefferson had been well received by the audience, Jefferson told James that he was proud of him but that only six rounds of applause were given when eight should have been received. He then showed

O'Neill where the "points" were and explained why the full eight "points" were not elicited. The next night James received the full eight. Fiske complimented James on this ability, when he stated, "He scores his 'points', for 'points' are inseparable from the roles of romantic stage heroes - not only with invariable precision, but with electrical effect."<sup>24</sup> Strang also, indirectly, spoke of James ability to elicit "points" when he noted O'Neill's ability, "in working up to and sustaining climaxes which made the impersonation [of Dantes] remarkably effective dramatically".<sup>25</sup> James played for "points" in Monte Cristo in this way. He would pause in the action, strike a pose at a particular moment, and wait for the applause. Eugene, his son, said the first thing he could remember as a child was his father "milking" for applause by striking a particular attitude. Eugene said his father would appear "dripping with salt and sawdust, climbing on a stool behind the swinging profile of dashing waves. It was then that the calcium lights in the gallery played on his long beard and tattered clothes, as with arms outstretched he declared the world was his. This was a signal for the house to burst into deafening applause that drowned out the noise of the mechanical storm being manipulated backstage".<sup>26</sup> This memory, Eugene mused, would remain with him forever.

By 1885, however, most other actors had abandoned this elaborate, visual "playing for points" method. As several critics noted, this style had become obsolete. "In the matter of gesture, every move disclosed him [O'Neill] as an actor in the regime that is slowly passing," stated one article. O'Neill was fond of using this



elaborate gesture, however, and was described by the St. Paul Dispatch as one of those "obligingly illustrative pantomimists whose hand always melted with the described ice, or thundered when being told about artillery".<sup>27</sup> This exuberance was sometimes criticized. One critic noticed that James "fell into some disagreeable mannerisms; he resorted to heavy breathing on slight pretexts; and manifested a disposition to overact in scenes calling for an exhibition of lively passion".<sup>28</sup> The extremely visual, large, sweeping gestures and frequent posing (the Forrest and Jefferson style which James had seen in his earlier career) were all part of the "old School" of acting, and were being replaced by a more subtle and realistic mode. In 1888, when James continued to use the "old school" method of striking poses for applause, the San Francisco Post lamented that James O'Neill "has become bad, hard, inartistic, and now seems to glory in claptrap".<sup>29</sup>

In addition to "playing for points", James presented a dynamic stage picture. In his portraits as the various characters of Monte Cristo, O'Neill appears in larger-than-life poses whether holding his hand high in blessing as the "Abbe Busoni" or reading the letter as "Edmund Dantes". Although this dynamic posing would have seemed absurd to the audiences of Monte Cristo. They even expected it. The crowds which flocked to melodramas wanted to "believe the unbelievable", and this was all a part of the romanticism of the experience. The production itself contained some "far-fetched" events, but the audiences continued to lay down their money for the

tickets. The San Francisco News Letter gave written account of the popularity of Monte Cristo despite these unrealistic flaws:

"It is exciting and interesting in spite of its many absurdities in detail...Dantes [O'Neill] in prison protrudes his head through a hole within only a few inches from the top of the parapet, and at the same time he goes on mining for his freedom; an order is given to double the guard for the purpose of shooting Dantes as he escapes, and the guard is then withdrawn. In the ballroom scene, Monte Cristo transacts business in the presence of the hostess and guests and bandies vulgar words with a bystander. Dangers writes a letter with his left-hand at the rate of 1999 words a minute. Nortier, shouts goodnight from his room at the inn, and ten seconds later, by the watch, his would-be murderess announces that he is asleep.

The waves in the Chateau d'If scene are simply dreadful. The apotheosis of all this absurdity is the scene where Dantes, standing on a two-by-four rock in the midst of bobbing chunks of wood and canvas receives a shower of salt. That this play, with all the supremely ridiculous details...should still excite and amuse, is a proof of its strong and romantic interest and powerful dramatic force. It is bound to draw for some time."<sup>30</sup>

Fiske noted that it was James who provided a large portion of this "romantic interest and dramatic force". He said that James made one believe the unbelievable: "No scene is unreal or improbable in which O'Neill appears; he shuts the door on reason, turns the key in the lock, and we are entranced beneath the wondrous spell of the actor who can conjure us away from the actual...and charm us with his heroes and their marvelous exploits."<sup>31</sup> James' ability to capture the audience was echoed by this reviewer who said: "His performances today as Edmund Dantes, despite his long service in the role, are characterized by the spirit and brilliancy of his first appearance in the part and he never fails to hold the audience with the sincerity and grace of his acting."<sup>32</sup>

But other critics blamed James for overacting and thereby ruining the play. They hailed the newer, more subtle form of acting and felt that James was hanging on to "the old school", which was dying. One irate critic blasted Monte Cristo, saying: "In James O'Neill's hands, it has become degenerated into an extravagant melodrama. The romance that amused and interested the intellectual world has now become a bit of coarse theatricalism."<sup>33</sup>

It is interesting to note that some critics did not feel that it was James who hurt the production, but that the production was ruining James' style and career. The theatre critic for the St. Louis Spectator felt that Monte Cristo was quickly deteriorating James' capabilities: "I hate to see a good clean-cut versatile actor spoiled, therefore I regret to see James O'Neill spending the best years of his life playing Monte Cristo. He is making of what might be an all-around star of fine capabilities and achievements a one-part actor. The playing of one part induces slovenliness and the playing of a highly romantic part, such as Edmund Dantes, invites affection and unnaturalness."<sup>34</sup>

James realized he was being limited and in 1893, after playing Monte Cristo for ten years, he observed, "And all this time I have been climbing up on a rock waving a knife and announcing that the world was mine. Do you wonder that I want to escape from it all. I want them to remember me as Virginus but they won't. I suppose I will be Edmund Dantes throughout the play and down to the final curtain".<sup>35</sup> This unhappiness eventually led to his difficulty in executing Dantes. "I find it hard to remember the words sometimes.

I have repeated them so often that they now demand considerable effort."<sup>36</sup> James' performance in Monte Cristo deteriorated out of apathy and his constant repetition of the character. James' son, Eugene, appeared with his father in the 1912 production of Monte Cristo, which was a chopped up version. Eugene's comment indicates his father's dulled enthusiasm for Monte Cristo. "The old man had been playing Monte Cristo so long he had almost forgotten it so he ad-libbed and improvised and never gave anybody a cue. You knew your turn came when he stopped talking."<sup>37</sup>

Although he tired of playing Edmund Dantes, the critics had realized Monte Cristo was "a good vehicle because it served James as an outlet for a highly romantic aptitude".<sup>38</sup> Although James was quite popular in Monte Cristo, he still wanted to act in other roles, but he was more and more submerged in playing Monte Cristo. "I have got to that point in life when every year counts",<sup>39</sup> he observed, so he attempted to break away from Monte Cristo and try other plays.

The final chapter will discuss the plays which followed Monte Cristo, the melodramas and contemporary plays which instead of allowing James to retire Dantes, only pushed him deeper into dependency on the romantic hero.

Footnotes for Chapter IV

- <sup>1</sup>J. B. Russak, ed. Monte Cristo and Other Plays (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, c. 1940, reissued 1965) p. 5.
- <sup>2</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup>Figaro, Sept. 11, 1875, p. 6, as quoted in Fisher, p. 120.
- <sup>4</sup>Figaro, May 25, 1875, p. 4, as quoted in Fisher, p. 118.
- <sup>5</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, June 18, 1876, p. 13, as quoted in Fisher, p. 124.
- <sup>6</sup>San Francisco Argonaut, July 11, 1878, as quoted in Fisher, p. 133.
- <sup>7</sup>Alexander, p. 64.
- <sup>8</sup>Strang, p. 146.
- <sup>9</sup>William Winter, Life and Art of David Belasco, (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1918) as quoted in Fisher, p. 135.
- <sup>10</sup>Harrison Grey Fiske, "James O'Neill" Famous American Actors of Today, (New York: Thos. Crowell and Co., 1896) p. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher, p. 157.
- <sup>11</sup>New York Times, April 29, 1873, p. 4, as quoted in Fisher, p. 152.
- <sup>12</sup>New York Dramatic Mirror, Feb. 17, 1883, p. 5, as quoted in Fisher, p. 148.
- <sup>13</sup>Gelb, p. 49.
- <sup>14</sup>Alexander, p. 52.
- <sup>15</sup>Fiske, P. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher, p. 156.

- <sup>16</sup> Locke Collection: "Gallery of the Gods: James O'Neill."  
no other information available, as quoted in Fisher, p. 155.
- <sup>17</sup> Russak, p. 36, 26, 38.
- <sup>18</sup> Locke Collection: "Ever Youthful Monte Cristo" as quoted in  
Fisher, p. 180.
- <sup>19</sup> St. Paul Dispatch, Feb. 17, 1909, p. 7 as quoted in Fisher, p. 181.
- <sup>20</sup> Fiske, p. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher, p. 157.
- <sup>21</sup> Strang, p. 173.
- <sup>22</sup> Locke Collection: L. H. Mitchell, March 18, 1908, as quoted in  
Fisher, p. 180.
- <sup>23</sup> Fiske, p. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher p. 157.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> Strang, p. 173.
- <sup>26</sup> Gelb, p. 62.
- <sup>27</sup> St. Paul Dispatch, Feb. 17, 1909, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher, p. 181.
- <sup>28</sup> Chicago Daily Tribune, April 12, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher, p.  
116.
- <sup>29</sup> San Francisco Evening Post, Jan. 7, 1888, p. 6, as quoted in Fisher,  
p. 116.
- <sup>30</sup> Gelb, p. 50.
- <sup>31</sup> Fiske, p. 307-308, as quoted in Fisher, p. 157.

<sup>32</sup>Locke Collection: Dec. 23, 1893, Source, title, author and pagination of article not cited as quoted in Fisher p. 178.

<sup>33</sup>Gelb, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup>Sheaffer, p. 42.

<sup>35</sup>Alexander, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 160.

<sup>38</sup>Ada Patterson, "Recalling the Romantic Drama", 1908, no other information available, as quoted in Fisher, p. 156.

<sup>39</sup>Alexander, p. 51.

### After Monte Cristo

Playing Monte Cristo made James a wealthy man. He toured back and forth across the United States, and the play, as well as James, received wide exposure. But James realized that, true to the critics warnings, he had become a one-part actor. Therefore, he made several attempts to break away from Monte Cristo.

The vehicle which James attempted that most resembled Monte Cristo was The Musketeers, in which he played d'Artagnan. The role, like Dantes, involved romantic scenes of dueling and high action, and as these were James' trademark, it was surprising when the Dramatic Mirror praised his portrayal generously. "Mark the effectiveness of his swordplay, the fire of his lovemaking, his buoyant and agile grace of movement, his mobile facial expression, the ease with which he doffs his plumed hat, and the swagger with which he wears his ever-ready rapier. This is d'Artagnan himself, and I advise every young actor who gets the change to study the impression in every detail."<sup>1</sup> The Musketeers was based on a novel by Dumas, just as Monte Cristo was, but the fact that it was not Monte Cristo gave James a bit of new vigor in his acting. Munsey Magazine reviewed The Musketeers and commented on this, noting that James brought "to the new Dumas hero all the enkindling enthusiasm that characterized his approach to that other creation of the French novelist".<sup>2</sup>

The next vehicle, The Dead Heart (1890) was similar to The Musketeers as it, too, was a melodrama with a plot resembling



Tale of Two Cities. The original production in 1859 had many contrivances, and as a finale, the hero-priest was unjustly sent to the guillotine for a gory and overpowering finish. In James' production, he decided the hero should not be a priest, but a layman (to win the girl, of course). He also decided that a lesser character should die on the guillotine, and though James was sentenced to share the same fate, he was saved off-stage. As the final curtain came down he returned to his lady-love and all ended well. O'Neill was praised by a Boston critic for his performance, although The Dead Heart was proclaimed "old fashioned and out of touch with the times". The reviewer continued, "...it is not too great praise of his [O'Neill's] work to say that no other actor in America could have so well acted the difficult role of Robert Landry. The lightness of touch which characterized the earlier scenes, the intensity, pathos and effectiveness of his scene outside the Bastille, and the dignity, force, and impressiveness of his work later on, proved how excellent is the quality of this artist."<sup>3</sup> The Dead Heart was an encouragement to James, but it was still a melodrama.

James wanted to try a contemporary play which was not a melodrama, and chose The Envoy (1891) as his next production. Unfortunately, this modern dress play set in New York was by an unknown playwright, E. J. Schwartz, and the New York Times criticized both The Envoy and James O'Neill. James' old-fashioned acting style prompted the Times critic to say of him and fellow "old school" actor Louis James "neither is quite a good actor". After criticizing O'Neill's brogue (James was playing an Italian Count) and his generally poor

performance in The Envoy, the reviewer went on to review James' acting style as a whole:

"Mr. O'Neill during his prosperous career as a traveling star, has acquired stage manners and tricks never learned when he was playing faithfully in the ranks. For the sake of posing he deprives the current play of the little probability the author had by accident put into it. Mr. O'Neill's profitable experience with the Fechter version of Monte Cristo has not improved his art, and last night he was exceedingly careless and slipshod in the delivery in this share of the text."

"The part of Count Pierotti in The Envoy is Edmund Dantes all over again. He is an avenger. How he becomes one does not matter... Mr. O'Neill stalked and posed and disappointed intelligent spectators as he did in Monte Cristo."<sup>4</sup> The play was equally unpopular with audiences, and it closed twelve days after its opening on May 4, 1891.

Another failure for O'Neill was Fontanelle, which James asked Harrison Gray Fiske to write. The editor of the Dramatic Mirror and his actress wife Mrs. Minnie Fiske collaborated in their efforts and wrote an elegant melodrama set in France about the adventures of Henri de Fontanelle (O'Neill). This play toured (many small cities) across the United States. James played it in rotation with Monte Cristo, but the audiences did not want to see Fontanelle. To James' dismay the audiences cheered the contrived lines uttered by Dantes, but when Fontanelle cried, "Curse her! Horse or no horse, I'll follow her",<sup>5</sup> James was laughed off the stage by one Ohio audience. The Cleveland Plain Dealer blamed this unfortunate incident on the poor dialogue in Fontanelle and noted that "the unnatural melodrama of the play, of course, makes this acting take on a melodramatic

tinge and he seems to always be struggling for artificial effect."<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, the public attitude had changed. Where "playing for points" and "posting" had been considered an asset before, the audiences and critics were steering away from such "artificiality", and it was even being looked upon as poor acting. James' son, Eugene, remembered his father's style and the "old school" of acting with dislike: "As a boy I say so much of the old ranting... Artificial, romantic stuff, that I always had a sort of contempt for the theatre."<sup>7</sup>

Realism and mechanization became the vogue for the stage. "The dramatic outlook is black", James told Eugene. "The stage has never been in such a diabolical condition...art in the theatre is losing ground and the honorable profession of acting is becoming a trade."<sup>8</sup> In 1909, James complained that the actor had lost individualism with the evolution of the contemporary director. "Today everything must be carefully planned and executed with mechanical precision. The producer lays out your every move like the course on a chart; you must speak the lines as he bids you speak them; you must make at a certain word such a gesture as he bids you make; you must move this way or that as he dictates. He is the master, and from his decision there is no appeal. And the result? Every performance is the reflex on one man's mind and one man's point of view. Individuality is gone and hopelessly lost, and art without individuality is impossible - the impersonal is always the mechanical."<sup>9</sup> James felt that the new forms of entertainment, including the popular vaudeville, were a disgrace to the theatre. He could not understand why "good

acting" was being replaced. "I wonder just how long the public will tolerate and endure the fearful dances which seem to pervade our everyday amusements," James stated. "There is nothing graceful, nothing refining, nothing inspiring about these wiggles and trots and hugs - indeed, they do away with every semblance of art and poetry and leave one flat against the stark materialities. But the people seem to demand them - and in the final analysis the people get what they want."<sup>10</sup>

In summary, James tried several melodramatic vehicles which were mildly successful such as The Muskateers and The Dead Heart. When he tried to play contemporary roles like The Envoy, he was unpopular and his acting style was considered outmoded and obsolete. James lamented, "When one has acted on the legitimate [sic] for fifty years as I have, with such great actors as Edwin Booth and Edwin Forrest, it is impossible to be resigned to the commonplaces of the modern style of play."<sup>11</sup>

In 1918, James officially retired from the theatre, but he felt an undeniable impression on the memories of thousands of audiences as the suave and agile hero who always won in the end. James, although bitter that he never earned a place as a great Shakespearean actor, did achieve the "gallery god" dream that he wished for as a young man. James' acting style was like a piece of gilt jewelry. When under the glittering lights, it was shiny and novel. After a few years, it became less and less admired as the novelty wore off. Soon it was placed away in the jewel-chest of the past and was replaced by a newer ornamental mode. The unhappy fact was that instead of gilt, James had intended to be gold.

Footnotes for Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>Alexander, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Locke Collection: Munsey Magazine, May 1899, no page cited, as

<sup>3</sup>Locke Collection "Hollis-the Dead Heart", Oct. 4, 1900, as quoted in Fisher, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup>Edward Dithmar, "Edmund Dante in New York", p. 8, as quoted in Fisher, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup>Archie Binns, Mrs. Fiske and the American Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, 1955), p. 51, as quoted in Fisher, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup>Cleveland Plain Dealer, No. 15, 1872, p. 4, as quoted in Fisher, p. 211.

<sup>7</sup>Gelb, p. 64.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander, p. 63

<sup>9</sup>Chicago Tribune, Oct. 24, 1909, p. 9, as quoted in Fisher, p. 183.

<sup>10</sup>Locke Collection: April 21, 1912, as quoted in Fisher, p. 187.

<sup>11</sup>Alexander, p. 238.

## Conclusions

The evidence presented in the previous chapters supports and leads to some interesting discoveries about James O'Neill, and the techniques that he utilized as an actor. A brief statement of the major points will now be presented and discussed in greater detail as the chapter progresses.

1. James O'Neill had a striking appearance which affected his acting style.
2. O'Neill as a young actor was an avid student of the more established artists.
3. As James developed confidence, he learned to minimize his flaws and play up his abilities.
4. As a result, James developed a flamboyant technique which emphasized physicalization and emotionalism.
5. The critics declared that James' style was too elaborate for classical roles.
6. When he turned to melodramatic roles, James became successful as a romantic hero.
7. Monte Cristo gave James a special opportunity to employ his talents as an actor.
8. James was unable to change his style when public demand steered away from romanticism for several reasons.

James did not begin life with wealth and position, but he was handsome and intelligent. James was an achiever. His wit and attractiveness gave him encouragement to become an actor. "I believe I had a subconscious assurance - the promise of a sublime - possibly

a ridiculous faith - that I should be an actor one day, although no possibility seemed more remote. However, what's an Irish lad without his dream? And so I carried mine along with me cherishing it."<sup>1</sup> Because O'Neill was young and athletic when he became an actor, he was able to radiate a good deal of energy and vitality in his acting. His handsome appearance enabled him to play romantic leads as well as character roles. His carriage was noble, and he wore clothing with an elegant air. His youth was a great asset to his acting style.

James made every attempt to achieve his "dream", and to show himself worthy of being an actor. He accepted small parts in his early career, and became attentive to the established artists whom he played with. In Edwin Forrest, he observed the "old school" acting methods of "posing", large gestures, and graceful, elaborate stage movement. Charlotte Cushman taught him to use his voice, as well as encouraged him in the art of inventing "business". Booth influenced O'Neill, who drew upon the older actor's style of "emotional sincerity" and subtleness. Joseph Jefferson, who was later influence, instructed James in "playing for points", a technique which James later employed in Monte Cristo as he struck emotion-evoking stances and waited for the audience's appreciation.

As a result of these influences, James began to establish a (highly spirited) acting style. He was sensitive to the reviews of the critics and determined to correct the flaws which the notices reprimanded him for. As he developed confidence as an actor, he began

to master those elements which held him back in his career. His brogue became more subtle, though never entirely disappeared, and his diction and elocution were studied and refined. When James needed to make the most of his small physical stature, he wore boots and drew the attention to his physical gracefulness and masculine bearing. Furthermore, James learned to emphasize his strengths. When critics praised James' vitality and exuberance, these traits became a mainstay of his acting method. The critics also noted his athletic prowess and his romantic manner. For example, the Chicago Daily Tribune evaluated O'Neill's romantic adeptness in this way: "Mr. O'Neill makes love enchantingly, and if anything can be regarded as his specialty, it is this."<sup>12</sup> Thus, duelling abilities and passionate scenes of romantic encounters became his trademark. When James had played with McVickers' company one year, a reviewer hailed his ability to be an apt pupil who learned to display his talents effectively: "After the study of a year, he is the equal of some stars, and the superior of many more."<sup>13</sup>

James had developed a highly physical technique which employed many of the techniques which were already considered old-fashioned in the 1870's. James was excessively anxious to please, and his dogged efforts caused him trouble with some of the critics. "Superfluity is Mr. O'Neill's besetting sin...he is driven to super-human efforts to make a fair contrast and this makes him gasp and



otherwise tear himself to tatters. When he has overcome these faults, he will be a charming actor on the high road to fame."<sup>4</sup> His mobile facial expression and powerful line delivery earned him recognition also. James, who was raised in poverty and had little formal education, most likely was delighted to play out his "dream" of being garbed in elegant costume and achieving "gallery god" status.

James' career was "promising", and he was playing complicated roles like Macbeth and Othello at twenty-seven years of age. But the critics were always speaking of James' future, and few gave him acclaim for his acting at the time. Much later in his career, he was lamented by the New York Times in this notice: "Mr. O'Neill's way of seeming always to be on the verge of doing something...has been his strongest hold. For a time, this peculiarity deceived critical playgoers; they used to say to each other, looking very wisely: 'Watch O'Neill. He'll do something someday.' But that was a long while ago, and O'Neill's promise of doing something has never been fulfilled."<sup>5</sup> Although Shakespeare was James' greatest love, he realized that he must try other vehicles. The Tribune states: "Mr. O'Neill has not enough native genius to follow... [his] classical aspirations...and the sooner he recognizes this hard fact, the better; but he is the possessor of abilities which, if deeply cultivated, will carry him to a high and honorable position in his art."<sup>6</sup>

James wanted to become a successful actor and therefore accepted melodramatic roles when his classical career attracted more criticism

than praise.

Immediately it was evident that James' forte was being a romantic hero. His gymnastic qualities fit the romantic leading characters well. With Monte Cristo, came James' chance to display his talents to their fullest. Had James remained in classical roles, he probably would have never had the chances that Monte Cristo gave him:

1. Because it was a melodramatic piece, Monte Cristo allowed James to use his highly emotional and showy acting style, which included "playing for points" and swordfighting.
2. Monte Cristo gave O'Neill the freedom of playing not one, but four distinct characters ranging from young to mature, and poor to rich. An actor needed to display a good deal of versatility to be convincing with four characterizations.
3. The love story which ran through Monte Cristo permitted James to exhibit his ability to "woo", which encouraged his popularity with the young matinee crowd.
4. In playing a sympathetic character like Edmund Dantes, O'Neill had an easy chance to arouse encouragement and emotion from the audience. This encouragement most likely, in turn, reinforced James' identification with hero-like roles.
5. As James had purchased the rights from Stetson, he could add any business he wished and did not have to stick with the version which Fechter employed. This permitted James to use the stage innovations at which he was so adept.

In the course of the thirty years during which James played Monte Cristo, a more realistic approach came into favor. James, however, was unable to change his romantic style for several reasons: (1) O'Neill's technique had probably been "set" by the time he left McVickers'. No longer was he expected to meet the demands of the classical roles; (2) James had a high regard for the "old school" actors and refused to accept the newer, more realistic forms of acting. "I don't know where the good young actors are coming from, too many of the younger players are too lazy to study,"<sup>7</sup> James complained; (3) By the time James appeared in Monte Cristo, he was already forty years old. Had he been a very young actor, it would have been much easier to establish a different style. However, once James found an appropriate style for his abilities, he did not alter it.

"You're all laughing at me now," James had cried after his first few experiences on the stage, but as James had declared, he did become the actor he said he would become. He combined his natural abilities with his achieved talents to become one of the best-loved actors of the melodramatic stage. He had such a deep love and fascination for acting that he was overawed by the beauty of what it could achieve. He remembered his first speaking part in The Coleen Bawn affectionately as a frightening but wonderful experience. When he first spoke the lines "there was a ringing in my ears and a sensation of drowning in deep waters swept across my heart".<sup>8</sup> It was with this fascination which James tackled every new aspect of his acting approach.

In conclusion, James O'Neill held audiences for over three decades under the spell of Monte Cristo with an acting style which was flashy, elegant, and romantic. Evening after evening, the flashing eyes looked over the footlights to see crowded houses awaiting his famous "The World is Mine" speech. James gave the audience what they wanted, an evening of entertainment at the theatre.

Footnotes for Conclusion

<sup>1</sup>Gelb, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, Aug. 10, 1873, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher,  
p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Gelb, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Sheaffer, p. 29-30.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Dithmar, "Edmund Dantes in New York", New York Times, May 5,  
1891, p. 8, as quoted in Fisher, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Chicago Daily Tribune, April 12, 1874, p. 7, as quoted in Fisher,  
p. 42.

<sup>7</sup>Alexander, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup>Alexander, p. 31.

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*As D'Artagnan  
in The Musketeers in 1899*



*As Pierre in  
The Two Orphans in 1876*



JAMES O'NEILL  
*As D'Artagnan in "The Musketeers."*

Guide to Plates

Plate 1    Sheafer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright.

Plate 2    Strang, Famous Actors, Vol. II, (Boston: L. C. Page and  
Co., 1902).

Plate 3    Sheaffer, O'Neill: Son and Playwright.



AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACTING STYLE OF JAMES O'NEILL

by

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### Abstract

#### AN ANALYSIS OF THE ACTING STYLE OF

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by

Suzanne Torok Burge

The career of James O'Neill spanned more than forty years from 1875 to 1918. He was known primarily as a romantic actor, his most famous role being Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo. Although he became identified with swashbuckling heroic roles, he had originally intended to be a classical actor and had studied such great tragedians as Edwin Forrest, Charlotte Cushman, and Edwin Booth.

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the acting style which James formed early in his career and which remained his trademark throughout a variety of classical, character, and melodramatic roles. A short biography and career summary introduce the thesis and are followed by chapters dealing with the influences on James' style, his faltering career as a Shakespearean artist, and his evolution as a "gallery god". The discussion emphasizes the stage picture which James O'Neill presented along with the natural abilities and studied techniques that he employed.

Many of James O'Neill's personal views concerning his own acting style and the trends in stage methods are presented, as well as numerous reviews and critiques of James' portrayals. Concluding the thesis is a selection of photographs illustrating the more notable roles which James played.